Is the Internet over?

The RMIT Media and Telecommunications Policy hosted a seminar in Sydney on Datacasting and Interactive Services on July 26

Datacasting and Interactive Services brought together media analysts, industry participants, and legal and regulatory representatives to debate the implications of datacasting as an emergent media form with the potential to combine the content and information access of the World Wide Web with the convenience and usability of television.

Two issues dominated the day's discussions. The first was whether datacasting will be broadly defined in policy and regulatory terms, and thus potentially overlap with broadcasting, and whether it will be a distinctive service which current free-to-air broadcasters will be able to develop but not a form of "backdoor broadcasting" for potential new players.

Nigel Dews from Fairfax Online Services and Tony Branigan, chair of the Federation of Australian Commercial Television Stations (FACTS), debated the legal and regulatory issues in the first session. Branigan was particularly concerned that there were sufficient constraints so as not to undercut the agreements reached under the 1998 federal legislation, which gave additional spectrum to existing free-to-air broadcasters at no cost in order to promote the development of high-definition TV (HDTV) and "enhanced services", while setting limits upon their ability to develop multichannel services in the short to medium term.

In a later session, Ian MacGill from Allen, Allen & Hemsley indicated that there was a gulf between datacasting as defined in the *Broadcasting Services Act* and datacasting as it was developing in the marketplace, and warned of the danger of "erecting an attractive but irrelevant edifice" in Australian broadcasting law.

The second major issue was whether technological developments and international trends will simply overwhelm any attempts to develop a uniquely Australian approach to these issues. Malcolm Long of Communications Strategies and Management and author of a major study of international trends in datacasting, said that datacasting and interactive services will be part of a "cocktail" of enhanced and converged services, including pay TV, the Internet and digital television, which at least 25-30% of Australian homes will access from the home by 2005. He believes that a boom in demand for broadband cable modems will mean that the "Internet era" will be effectively over by 2003. TV datacasting and HDTV will develop as part of a transformation of television towards added functionality and a fragmentation of digital multimedia services in terms of what they are and how they are accessed. This will see the World Wide Web become more of an entertainment medium as it is re-authored for TV and accessed from the home.

Long also expressed concern about a growing "digital divide" between the information haves and the have-nots but saw a capacity for datacasting accessed from digital TVs to become a new way of extending access to government services and providing new forms of public service involvement, reaching those currently without Internet access.

Similar projections of a rapid uptake for datacasting were made by Carl Braden of Oracle and Jon Simon from OzEmail. Braden drew attention to the speed of take-up of digital TV in Europe, led by Canal+ in France and BIB (a subsidiary of Rupert Murdoch's Sky TV) in the UK, as well as a sharp decline in costs for set-top boxes and the delivery of Internet-type services to the home TV. Simon projected that Electronic Program Guides could turn out to be the "killer app" as consumers realised the capacity they presented to personalise access to TV programming. Philip Sykes from Telstra and Dominic Stone from IBM were more cautious, warning that the current debate is still something of a "customer-free zone", and that delivery of enhanced services through the TV will present a series of consumer service issues for broadcasters which they have not had to deal with previously, as well as requiring broadcasters and advertisers to develop new models for business and for content creation.

The distinction between "big" datacasting - the wholesale convergence of information technologies in the home - and "little" datacasting - the use of broadcast services bands for enhanced services - was made by Giles Tanner, general manager of the Australian Broadcasting Authority (ABA). He said that it was only the latter which was of concern to the ABA as it entailed allocation of spectrum space. He drew attention to the difficulties involved in creating new spectrum for datacasting in Sydney in particular, and raised the issue of reclaiming the space currently allocated to community services (Channel 31), which would instead broadcast on the basis of a "must carry" rule for a new digital datacaster. He also indicated the possibility that News Corporation may operate a new digital TV channel by 2003, and envisaged further blurring between broadcasting and new services such as datacasting as "back channels" are developed, and as regulated and unregulated services co-exist on the same medium.

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